



Gray Whale Fact Sheet

Gray whales (*Eschrichtius robustus*) are a baleen whale species which is readily recognized by a mottled gray color and lack of a dorsal fin. Instead of a dorsal fin, gray whales have a low hump, followed by a series of knobs along the dorsal ridge of the tail stock, which are easily seen when the animal arches to dive. The adult gray whale is 36 to 50 feet long and weighs between 16 and 45 tons. Both male and female gray whales reach sexual maturity when they are between 5 and 11 years old.

There are two populations of gray whales: the eastern North Pacific (ENP) population migrates along the west coast of North America between Mexico and Alaska, and the western North Pacific population migrates along the coast of eastern Asia. These populations are geographically separated and genetically distinct.

Most of the ENP gray whales inhabit the waters of the Bering Sea during summer and fall where they feed on amphipods by scraping the ocean floor in shallow water creating large mud plumes. As ice begins to form in northern latitudes during the fall, the whales begin a southward migration nearly 6000 miles to the lagoons along the Baja Peninsula of Mexico.

Female gray whales usually breed once every two years. After a gestation period of about 13 months, gray whale calves are born in the winter towards the end of the southbound migration. At birth, the calves are 15 feet long and weigh close to 1,000 pounds. The mothers' rich milk, containing more than 50% fat, nourishes the calves for several weeks on the winter grounds and during the long migration to the summer grounds.

Not all of the gray whales complete the northward migration to the Bering Sea in the spring. Some remain along the coastline from California to Alaska to feed during late spring, summer, and fall. The term Pacific Coast Feeding Aggregation (PCFA) has been used to describe gray whales that do not migrate as far as the Bering Sea. PCFA whales are not genetically different from whales that feed in the Bering, so the eastern North Pacific population is managed as a single stock.

The ENP gray whale population has made a remarkable recovery since its depletion in the early 1900s caused by commercial whaling. Gray whales were listed as endangered in 1970 along with most large whale species, but the population has nearly doubled during the period when abundance estimates were made (1967 to 2002). The last estimate of abundance was about 18,000* from the 2002 survey. In 1994, NMFS determined that the ENP gray whale population had recovered to near its estimated original population size and was neither in danger of extinction throughout all or a significant portion of its range, nor likely to again become endangered within the foreseeable future, so the eastern North Pacific gray whale population was formally removed from the list of endangered and threatened wildlife under the ESA.

* A previous version of the fact sheet estimated abundance at 17,000. This updated version incorporates the most recent abundance estimate in Rugh, D.J., R.C. Hobbs, J.A. Lerczak, and J.M. Breiwick. 2005. Estimates of abundance of the eastern North Pacific stock of gray whales (*Eschrichtius robustus*) 1997-2002. J. Cetacean Res. Manage. 7:1-12.